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SHORT PAPER

Identifying, assessing and supporting children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse: A UK comparison

SEPTEMBER 2011

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This briefing paper critically explores the development of policy, with a focus on identification, assessment and support, for children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse across the United Kingdom. Historically child welfare policies and drug and alcohol policies have been distinctly separate. Drug and alcohol policies have identified children as a concern due to their own use of substances, rather than being affected by another person's use. In 2003, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) produced a seminal inquiry report, *Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users* that highlighted the prevalence, impact and support needs of children of problem drug users across the UK. In 2007, ACMD produced a follow-up report monitoring progress across the UK.

Across the four nations, child welfare legislation outlines the role of the state in supporting children and families in need. Under the Children Act 2004 (England and Wales), the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, children affected by parental drug and/or alcohol misuse may be identified a 'child in need' and potentially a 'child at risk of significant harm'.

KEY POINTS

- Children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse are often hidden due to secrecy, stigma and fear
- The report *Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users* (ACMD, 2003) has been a catalyst for action across the UK
- In policy and practice, there is a greater focus on children affected by parental drug misuse compared to parental alcohol misuse
- Although there has been progress in the identification of children's needs and the development of services, there is significant variance across the UK in providing equitable access to appropriate services.

FINDINGS

Across all four nations progress was identified, although to differing extents, with overall greater recognition of the needs of children affected by problem drug use (ACMD, 2007). The work of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2003, 2007) has raised the profile of the unmet needs of children of problem drug users. The most timely

and comprehensive response from Scotland is likely to reflect the political recognition and the earlier attempts to address the needs of children through specific guidance (Scottish Executive, 2003). Northern Ireland and Wales have taken longer to address the agenda with action plans, rather than written responses, yet current policy initiatives if fully implemented look promising (PHA/HSCB, 2009; WAG, 2008).

KEY THEMES

ESTIMATING PREVALENCE

Estimating how many children are affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse presents many challenges. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs estimated there are between 250 000 and 350 000 children of problem drug users in the UK based on adult treatment populations (ACMD, 2003). A European study estimated between 780 000 and 1.3 million children are living with adults with an alcohol problem in the UK (EUROCARE & COFACE, 1998).

New estimates derived from five national household surveys provide more detailed prevalence figures for the United Kingdom (Manning et al., 2009). In 2000, an estimated 2.6 million children (aged under 16) were living

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with a hazardous drinker. Just under 300 000 children (around 2.5%) were living with a harmful drinker and just over 700 00 children were living with a drinker who met the criteria for alcohol dependence. One million children had a parent who had used an illicit drug in the previous year. 334 000 children lived with a dependent drug user and 107 000 children lived with a parent who had experienced a drug overdose and 72 000 children were living with a parent who was an injecting drug user.

ASSESSING CHILDREN AFFECTED BY PARENTAL DRUG AND ALCOHOL MISUSE

Across England & Wales, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used as a single multi-agency assessment tool. In Northern Ireland, a similar common assessment framework has been developed to work with children and their families, Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI). As part of the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) reform programme in Scotland, a 'My World' assessment triangle has been developed. This is used with a 'Resilience matrix' that allows practitioners to map the strengths and adversities in a child's life.

SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

A central theme across the four nations is the need for children's services and adult addiction services to develop co-ordinated responses at a strategic, as well as a service, level. The Northern Ireland Action Plan (2009) outlines the need for a 'shared commitment and response', led by children's and addiction services, to achieve positive outcomes for parents and children. This change is understood within a broader shift in child welfare policies to recognise that all agencies, whether housing, health, police, education, social care, have a responsibility to consider the welfare of children. Although some adult addiction services have a history of working with the family, there has been an inconsistent and variable response in considering the needs of children.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY

- There have been significant policy developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland yet the challenge is the implementation and monitoring of stated plans

PRACTICE

- The provision of services for children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse remains geographically limited.

- Access to services relies on identification by professionals; opportunities for children and young people to self-refer to services should be explored.

RESEARCH

- The enablers and barriers in implementing policy at a national and local level should be explored with learning disseminated.

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Further information about this study can be obtained from
childprotection@ed.ac.uk

ABOUT THE CENTRE

The **Child Protection Research Centre** was set up in 2007 as a unique collaboration between The University of Edinburgh and the NSPCC. Our research is designed to generate a more integrated and deeper understanding of child protection in the UK and internationally, in order to strengthen policy and practice.

The Centre is committed to pursuing a programme of knowledge exchange that makes a positive impact, including fostering dialogue between policy makers, practitioners and academia.

The University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Centre for UK-wide Learning in Child Protection (CLiCP). This name features of publications produced between 2007-2011.

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